

EX-U.S. ENVOY SAYS HE WAS ORDERED TO ASSIST CONTRAS

By DAVID E. ROSENBAUM

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 28 — A former United States Ambassador to Costa Rica, who has been accused of improperly helping the rebels in Nicaragua, testified today that he was operating under direct orders from the National Security Council, the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency.

The envoy, Lewis A. Tambs, said his main assignment when he was sent to Costa Rica in July 1985 was to help the contras open a military front across the border in southern Nicaragua.

Mr. Tambs told the Congressional committees investigating the Iran-contra affair that his direct order came from Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North, a National Security Council aide who was the central figure in the Administration's efforts on behalf of the contras.

Envoy Says Superiors Knew

He said Elliott Abrams, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, and Alan D. Fiers, head of the C.I.A. Central American Task Force, were completely familiar with his activities and, he assumed, had authorized them.

Mr. Tambs agreed with the view of some on the committee that his former superiors had apparently abandoned him and his staff.

Representative Dante B. Fascell, a Florida Democrat, asked him: "Why would guys cut and run at this point and leave you hanging out there in the wind?"

"I don't know, sir," Mr. Tambs responded. "You'd have to ask them." [Excerpts, page A10.]

Three-Agency Task Force

Colonel North, Mr. Abrams and Mr. Fiers were the members of an informal organization called a Restricted Interagency Group, or RIG, that helped set Government policy on the contras.

In his testimony, Mr. Tambs repeated much of what he told The New York Times in an interview four weeks ago. But he was more explicit today about Mr. Abrams's position. Speaking of Mr. Abrams's knowledge of his assignment to help the contras, Mr. Tambs said, "It was obvious to me that he knew as much about it as I did."

Mr. Abrams and other officials at the State Department and the C.I.A. have

repeatedly denied having anything to do with the covert program to help the contras at a time when the law prohibited Government officials from providing military assistance to the Nicaraguan rebels.

Conflict With Abrams

Mr. Abrams is scheduled to testify before the committees Friday. Lawyers for the committees have taken his sworn deposition, and some legislators suggested today that his testimony would conflict with that of Mr. Tambs.

Senator Warren B. Rudman, a New Hampshire Republican, indicated that he believed Mr. Tambs's version, which the senator said was in "absolute conflict with other testimony this committee will have."

Senator Rudman said that when Mr. Tambs heard what the other witnesses would have to say, "I think you will probably burn up."

The senator said he sympathized with Mr. Tambs's sense that he and those who had worked with him in Central America were being abandoned by their superiors.

C.I.A. Man Disciplined

Mr. Tambs, who served as ambassador to Colombia before his assignment in Costa Rica, resigned in January and returned to Arizona State University, where he is a professor of Latin American history. The C.I.A. station chief in Costa Rica during Mr. Tambs's ambassadorship, who goes by the pseudonym Tomás Castillo, has been disciplined for his actions on behalf of the contras.

Mr. Castillo is to appear before the committees in a closed session Friday morning. A declassified transcript of his testimony, abridged for security reasons, is to be made public within 24 hours. Committee officials said the testimony would be taken that way so that Mr. Castillo would not become immediately recognizable and could continue to operate undercover.

Mr. Tambs said he never met directly with contra military leaders of the contras but that he his staff did so regularly. He said he personally persuaded Costa Rican authorities to allow the contras to open an air strip for refueling of supply flights and at one point arranged for a transport plane in trouble to land at the international airport in Costa Rica.

A Renegade Operation?

Some evidence introduced by committee lawyers today seemed intended to raise the possibility that Mr. Tambs was running a renegade operation.

They presented a series of cables between Mr. Tambs and the State Department in Washington involving an

agreement between John K. Singlaub, a retired Army major general, and Eden Pastora, the leader of a branch of the contras, to get supplies for rebel troops base din Costa Rica.

Mr. Tambs initial cable seemed to imply that the United States would provide the supplies. The ambassador was sharply criticized in cables from Washington, including one signed by Secretary of State George P. Shultz, and was told the United States could give no such assistance.

In his testimony, Mr. Tambs said General Singlaub was talking about goods provided by private parties in

the United States and not by the Government. He said his original cable was meant only to report on the agreement to his superiors in Washington.

Later, Mr. Tambs said he assumed Mr. Shultz knew of his help to the contras because he assumed Mr. Abrams had told him about it. But Mr. Tambs

said he had not spoken to the Secretary about the matter and did not know directly how much Mr. Shultz knew.

This morning, the committees finished questioning Felix Rodriguez, a retired C.I.A. agent who served as the liaison between the contra supply operation and authorities in El Salvador. The questioning added little of substance to Mr. Rodriguez's testimony Wednesday, but documents that were presented were seen by some legislators as added evidence that Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord was involved in profiteering. General Secord managed the contra supply operation and testified in his testimony early this month that he was not profiting personally.

One document presented today showed that a company set up by General Secord was paying airplane pilots and crew members involved in supply drops \$3,000 a month but was submitting bills for more than \$13,000 for each.